

Sistren-Jamaica: Women's Theatre for Cultural Decolonization

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Introduction

SISTREN, a Jamaican women's theatre collective and cultural organization, established itself in the seventies, a time of social democratic leadership in Jamaica, a time of severe unemployment especially for women, but also a time of social vision. For more than two decades the group has been part of the Caribbean struggle for cultural recognition and decolonization. It grew out of the context of the women's movement in the sense that the women's movement legitimized women's examination of their own struggles, yet SISTREN wouldn't call themselves "feminists".¹ The members of the SISTREN theatre collective come from poor rural families. When they first met, they had no experience in theatre or performance whatsoever. Through a training programme, sponsored by the Jamaican Government, they were given the chance to become teacher assistants, who had to supervise students arriving very early for the afternoon shift at school and give them a sensible task. With the help of a tutor of the Jamaica School of Drama, Honor Ford-Smith, the women who later formed SISTREN acquired dramatechniques, knowledge in folk-music and dance.

When in 1977 a workers-week-concert was to take place, the women decided to get together in their spare time and create a play. This was the beginning of an exciting learning process which changed their lives fundamentally.

After SISTREN had professionalized their method of creating plays, they developed an educational workshop programme, which suited the aim of taking drama to working class communities.

Biographical Approach

When Honor Ford-Smith, the drama tutor, asked the women, "What do you want to do a play about?", all of them were sure they wanted to do

¹Cf. Ford-Smith, Honor (1989): *Ring Ding in a Tight Corner*, Canada (The Women's Program, International Council for Adult Education), p. 21.

plays about how they suffer as women. A process of exchanging personal histories began. The women realized that they had a lot in common and that the conditions of their lives were a political matter. They decided to make politics themselves now by opening people's eyes, hearts and minds through theatre. To specify their personal experience, the women proceeded along three questions:

1. When did you first become aware of your oppression as a woman,
2. how did this affect your life,
3. how did you try to change your situation?²

Rape, ignorance about their own bodies, teenage pregnancy, exploitation, unemployment, oppression and discrimination were the things the women knew to talk about. With authenticity and directness, they made public those aspects of Jamaican women's lives which hadn't been addressed publicly before. Their first piece done for a workers-week-concert was called "Downpression Get a Blow". It was about female factory workers, the pressures they faced and the efforts they made to unionize in order to be able to demand basic rights. It was a tremendous success. Appreciation did not only come from working class people who felt their concerns had been met, but also from members of the theatre-scene who realized that this kind of theatre would be an enrichment of Jamaican culture.

Method

SISTREN came to the style and methodology of their work as a direct result of the problems and contradictions which confronted them while carrying out their aims of analyzing and commenting on the role of women in Jamaican society through theatre, to form into a self-reliant enterprise and to take drama to working class communities.

Before it comes to a presentation, the actresses have to go through the intensive process of developing the text for the play. To warm up and stimulate reflection every theatre session begins with physical exercises based on children's or question and answer games. This phase is followed by relaxation with music. Then the women sit down in a circle and everyone is asked to express something about a topic they have agreed on before. Everyone can jump up spontaneously and show what has gone through her mind. The rest of the members take over the role of the audience. So step by step all the possible feelings, ways of action and

²Their life-stories were collected in the book *Lionheart Gal* with Honor Ford-Smith (1986), London: The Women's Press.

expression come out. Then a lengthy discussion takes place about improvements, about how to make characterizations more exact, about the political and economical implications of the presented situations, about what to take and what to leave out. SISTREN go to libraries for further information or conduct interviews. Finally the dialogues are written down, the text derived from the improvisations gets its shape. Summarizing one can identify seven major methodological steps:

1. Warm-up,
2. discussion,
3. collecting information, improvisation,
4. presenting improvisations,
5. discussion - writing down the text,
6. final rehearsals,
7. première.

Stylistic Features

The most unusual feature in SISTREN's plays is that they are presented in Patois. Theories from different branches of research circle around the question, whether Patois is a language in its own right or a dialect. For SISTREN, the use of their own language clearly means liberation from colonialistic pressure. "Language is central to all power relations. Not to nurture such a language is to retard the imagination and power of the people who created it." The Patois' rhythm and imagery expresses the soul of the Jamaican people.

SISTREN often use children's games as dramatic tool. They provide a frame for actions and also crystallize the experience presented in a way everybody can understand. Using the games also has a symbolic meaning because the poor women from the country have been betrayed of their childhood. On stage they regain and reshape their real-life experiences. The idea of losers and winners is evoked and sure enough, in this game the women are the winners.

Another important aspect of SISTREN's work is the use of rituals as a metaphor for togetherness and being rooted in the African heritage, but also the intention to shed a critical light on religious practices in Jamaica. Social comment, irony and humor is conveyed by using mythological figures like Anansi or Trickster.

Special emphasis is put on their message by playing the male roles themselves. It gives them the chance to interpret the characters the way they see them.

Last not least, rhythm and music are crucial to SISTREN's work. They create text and music of songs from the basis of what can be heard in Jamaican everyday life, be it rap, reggae, gospel, or a hit from the radio which they integrate.

Rural Workshops and Theatre-In-Education

SISTREN's concern is not to perform for middle-class audiences in Kingston, but to multiply the process of how they themselves had become aware of the social and political situation in their country and share their newly gained knowledge with those who have no access to education. This meant they had to go to the country, stimulate discussion and interaction, learn about the problems people are facing and help them to organize themselves, to be able to act out on behalf of their own interest. For that purpose SISTREN designed a workshop programme, using the "Theatre-in-Education" method, briefly called TIE. As a theatre form in its own right, TIE emerged in Great Britain in 1965. Helped by the economic boom of the late sixties and early seventies, the first company was founded at Coventry and many followed. TIE work often has a social or political content, it does not baldly state a political message whatsoever, it offers participants an experience of a socio-political problem without giving a pat answer.³ As I am going to demonstrate with the description of one of SISTREN's workshops, the idea of TIE is to involve the participants physically, mentally and emotionally and through this total involvement, allow them to learn and understand by discovery.

A workshop starts with the presentation of a short play from SISTREN's repertoire followed by a discussion. Then the participants are guided towards the creation of their own dramatical presentation based on themes of their daily lives. When the participants (mostly women) see SISTREN's play, they generally recognize their own situation and react immediately with lively comments. Once a woman was so enthused that she said: "Lord Jesus, how do you know all those things, how did you know about me, that you could put me in the play!" When the women start discussing, a member of SISTREN writes down notes about all the problems that have been mentioned by them. Then the women are asked to point out their main concern, to specify the most pressing problem they themselves, their families or the community are facing. In the case I am referring to now, it turned out that the community had been without water supply for

³Redington, Christine (1983), *Can Theatre Teach?*, Great Britain, p. 2.

three weeks.⁴ They decided to do something to solve that water problem. The community water supply depends on a pump which needed repair. As warm-up activity proposed, the women were asked to imitate a water pump with their bodies. Trying to do this, it turned out that none of them really knew how such a pump worked. Luckily there was somebody else around, who knew about the pump and assisted the women to imitate its functioning. As main activity now, the participants were asked to think about possible solutions to the problem. They decided to send a delegation to the local Councillor, who was rarely seen in the community except during election time. Through role-playing, the participants worked out the way how to behave and argue with the Councillor.

The visit resulted in the decision to send a water truck to the area, on definite days and at definite hours, twice per week.

Critical Consciousness

Working out something together did not only have a financial effect for SISTREN. It also facilitated personal change. Before they had come together, they were not aware of all the things that were inside them, that they were living examples of what it means to be a woman in post-independence Jamaica. Although I cannot deploy all its philosophical assumptions here, the concept of "conscientization" developed by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire seems very useful to explain what "personal change" means with respect to SISTREN. The basic idea of the phenomenon of "conscientization" is a human process, found in the evolution of man, at the level of his consciousness. Knowledge of consciousness is something inherent to man; it is something that characterizes him and that basically helps him to relate to others and to nature. It helps him to explain the phenomena of life and to look for solutions to the problems posed by his environment. Freire claims that in the process of human evolution, consciousness goes through three different stages:

1. Magical consciousness, which does not consider itself superior to the facts or free to understand them, but takes them, attributing to them a superior power which dominates from the outside.
2. Naive consciousness, which considers itself superior to the facts, dominating them from outside, and therefore believing itself free to understand them as it fits and

⁴French, Joan (1985), "Three Experiments with Popular Theatre", in: *Organizing Women Through Drama in Rural Jamaica, Ideas and Action*, No.138 (FAO Magazine).

3. Critical consciousness, which is the representation of things and data as they exist empirically, in their causal and circumstantial correlations. It means that man can look at himself; he can observe reality and analyze it. This is to say, critical consciousness requires an active character.

The phenomenon of action and reflection in men is only found in a dialectic relationship with social practice and when the level of critical consciousness is reached.

Conscientization as a human fact is a constantly opening way, it is a permanent process of education. Freire also indicates that nobody becomes conscientized by himself, the group consciousness is important. The process of conscientization within SISTREN occurred from the basis of the group which was given the chance to establish itself through the "Special Employment Programme" of the Government. As I have explained earlier, a first qualitative change in consciousness took place when they realized they were all suffering from the same social conditions. Then there was the help of the tutor who never lost the overall view, gave impulses for other ways of thinking, was able to channel experiences into acting and let it derive into the final artistic form.

SISTREN come from a social environment where magical thinking and superstition especially in the area of sexuality are very common. In her book, *Mama Africa*, Evelyn Heinemann describes for example the belief that a woman becomes sterile if she eats certain fruit or vegetable, or that it is predetermined how many children a woman will have. If she practices birth control, she will not be healthy until she has given birth to all the children.⁵ The Jamaican world is full of duppies. To meet a duddy in a dream is not dangerous, but they are active at night, "Rolling Calf" and "Hooping Boy" are said not to be very friendly and handsome in the darkness.

The magical dimension of Jamaican daily life is an integral part of SISTREN's plays. For SISTREN themselves though, the magic has lost its direct power because they have reflected on its effect, have found symbols and images to present it on stage, they have developed a critical, active consciousness and it is this consciousness they are communicating with the audience.

⁵Heinemann, Evelyn (1990), *Mama Africa: Das Trauma der Versklavung*, Frankfurt/Main, p. 117f.

Images and Symbols

The arts have always been an important reservoir of resistance in the Caribbean. Rex Nettleford, a well-known Jamaican choreographer, dancer and cultural theorist writes: "As foremost creative activity serving Jamaican cultural resistance - not only throughout the periods of slavery and colonialism, but also following independence - dance was a primary instrument of survival. First it is a skill that depends on the physical and mental capacities of the survivor".⁶ In Kumina rituals in Jamaica, dance becomes the language of communication with the gods, the ancestors and the community. Departing from the recollection of their experiences of childhood, growing up and the transition to adulthood, SISTREN have in "Jamaican style" created powerful images and symbols of Caribbean femininity. They have revitalized the power of Nanny of the Maroons, the national heroine, who fought against the British, by making her story visible and emotionally perceivable on stage. The use of ritualistic elements became a code for reflection.

On the other hand, the popular tradition of folk songs, stories and other forms of oral literature have been contradictory with regard to women.

SISTREN had to create their own imagery and content by linking themselves with early Jamaican nationalist-feminist writers like Una Marson and Louise Bennett who struggled to build a dramatic movement which would reflect the voices of the working class, especially women. SISTREN also use the dramatic arts to define their identity as different from the dominant capitalist and European-derived culture.

Despite financial problems the members of the SISTREN theatre collective are facing right now, they will continue to fight for the rights of Jamaican women and teach others how to speak out and act on their own behalf. Becky Knowles, a member of SISTREN, has founded another young women's group, called "Teens-in-Action". Teens also create plays around topics related to their lives and present them at the annual national theatre festival. Once they won a gold medal for the best presentation.

⁶Nettleford, Rex (1985), *Dance Jamaica*, New York, p. 20.